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SUBJECT: A NERVOUS LULL IN DAMASCUS BEFORE THE NEXT MEHLIS
REPORT

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche, per 1.4 b,d.

¶1. (C) Summary and Comment: As five Syrian suspects arrive in Vienna for questioning set to begin on December 5, Syrians remain suspended in a nervous lull that ensued with President Bashar al-Asad's strident but generally well-received speech on November 10. With the perceived brinkmanship with UNIIIC head Detlev Mehlis having yielded Vienna as a venue, rather than Beirut, the success for the moment in shielding SMI chief Asif Shawkat from questioning, the widely bruited assurances from the Russians, and the (by Syrian standards) near-spectacular unveiling of the recanting witness Husam Husam, the Asad regime is perceived to have some momentum going its way. The highly nationalistic, marginally anti-American PR campaign centered in Damascus, emphasizing the need to protect Syrian dignity and interests, has reinforced public perceptions that the regime has at least temporarily regained the initiative.

¶2. (C) Summary and Comment continued: This lull, like the one that occurred in late September and early October, after the perceived SARG success in the interrogations in Damascus and before the issuance of Mehlis' hard-hitting report, is likely to end suddenly in mid-December. Conversations with contacts December 2-3 indicate that many Syrians believe the regime has bought some time, possibly several months, with its latest maneuvers. While the SARG is cooperating for the moment, many key contacts continue to insist that Asad, if required, will not -- some say "cannot" -- send Shawkat abroad for interrogation. Even among the five currently slated to be interrogated, the SARG is apparently concerned about their loyalties and morale. Contacts remain curious about USG intentions for Syria in the post-December 15 environment, questioning in particular if the U.S. wants to see a Sunni-led regime replace Asad and his family. End Summary.

¶3. (C) THE CURRENT LULL: The Syrians have "bought" three to four months time, with their recent maneuverings, since Mehlis will likely need an extension post-December 15, according to Riyadh Abrash. He described the level of Syrian cooperation to date as "typical, begrudging, but effective." They continue to play for time, in the hope that they can outlast Bush's political influence, given his troubles in Washington.

¶4. (C) CAN BASHAR DEAL WITH HIS SHAWKAT PROBLEM? Contacts remain divided about whether Asad is strong enough to move against SMI head Asif Shawkat. Abrash, All4Syria website founder Ayman Abdul Noor, and former MP and businessman Ihsan Sankar all insisted to PolChief in early December that the

President will refuse to send Shawkat abroad for questioning. Abrash pointed to personal characteristics signifying weakness to make his point, saying Bashar is hesitant, lacks political acumen, and loves the superficial trappings of power. He remains loyal to powerful people around him, despite any personal reservations he harbors, but will not protect those who are without powerful allies, if the pressure against them become too great, said Abrash. (Note: Abrash knows Asad from having briefed him periodically on his semi-official trips to Washington. An economist, Abrash harbors some bitterness that Asad in 2001 did not offer him a promised Cabinet position, after opposition expressed by a senior official in one of the security services, thought to be Bahjat Sulayman.)

15. (C) Abdul Noor attributed the anticipated Asad refusal to send Shawkat for questioning to regime adherence to its real strategy, which is to opt for confrontation, although for the moment it is going through the motions of cooperating. Sankar viewed Asad's inability to turn Shawkat over to Mehlis for questioning in Vienna as a function of family politics, where Shawkat's wife and mother-in-law (Asad's sister and mother) have pre-emptively attacked Bashar and warned him that "he will be next" if he does not protect Shawkat.

16. (C) THE OTHER WITNESSES: Regarding the other witnesses, Sankar described Dafer Yusuf and Rustom Ghazaleh as potentially dangerous to the regime, because of the regime secrets they know about, and because their loyalty to the

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regime is now shaky. (According to Sankar, Yusuf does not feel that the regime has showed him the respect he deserves.) Abdul Noor made a similar point, noting that the regime was concerned and had done everything possible to shore up the confidence of the suspects that the regime would protect them (and get them back to Syria after the interrogations). Both Sankar and Abdul Noor said that the regime would "lose the street and its support" if Mehlis offers persuasive proof of Syrian complicity and the regime then refuses to cooperate. Previous refrains asserting that Syria as a nation should not be sacrificed for the (often corrupt) interests of a half-dozen regime members are likely to be heard again, say these contacts.

17. (C) A SUNNI REGIME IN THE FUTURE? Sankar and Abrash both probed on the issue of whether the U.S. wanted to see a Sunni-dominated regime eventually assume power. While Abrash acknowledged that the USG had not made its intentions clear, he speculated that the U.S. would like to see such a regime in Syria, as a bulwark against ascendant Shiite influence in Iraq. Abrash, like Sankar, from a prominent Damascene family, also noted that U.S. allies in the region (generally Sunni regimes) were also likely to be supportive. In the past, western powers had generally supported regimes with "contrasting tones" in Iraq and Syria, for example an Alawite minority regime in Syria paired with a Sunni regime in Iraq, explained Abrash. Without some kind of an external push, however, there would be no regime change in Syria, said Abrash, noting that the regime is in complete control. Sankar mused about whether it was time for him to begin reaching out to potentially disaffected, retired Alawite chieftains like Ali Duba, Ali Zeyout, Mohammed Khouli, and Ali Haydar, as well as to GID deputy chief Mohammed Nassif (whom Sankar says now has a travel ban imposed on him.)

18. (C) On a separate issue, Sankar offered a refreshingly supportive view on Kamal Labwani, saying that the views he expressed publicly during his trip to the U.S. had been "very good, very helpful" and echoed many of the things Sankar himself has said publicly in the past. Sankar denied that Syrians who knew of Labwani had turned against him. In fact, many agreed with Labwani but were fearful to say anything publicly. Labwani has a political future in Syria, not as a solo actor, but as one of a group of nascent opposition figures, said Sankar.

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